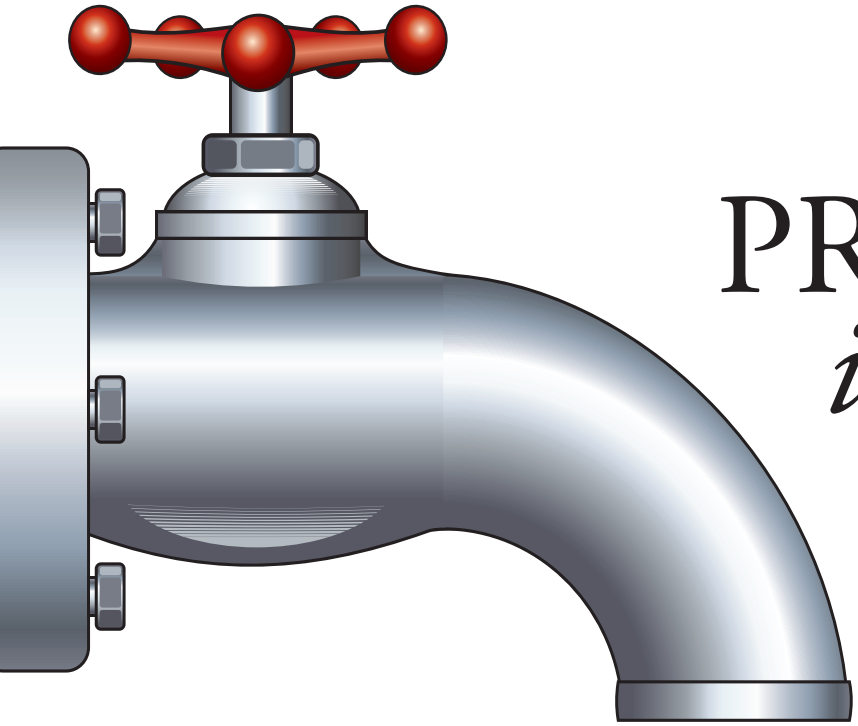


# PRINCIPALS *in the* PIPELINE

**DISTRICTS CONSTRUCT A FRAMEWORK TO DEVELOP SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

"Attention, job seekers. Log on to your computers and watch the 20-minute video of the teacher giving a math lesson. Then write a memo to the teacher, critiquing her work. Make sure that what you say is informed by our outline of what principals need to focus on when observing instruction — such as whether students are engaged, how much time is allotted for discussion, and the fit between class activities and ideas being taught.

"Before committing your answer to paper, think carefully. The quality of your memo — along with your performance on the other tasks in our revamped hiring procedure — will determine whether you land a job as a school principal in Prince George's County, one of the nation's largest school districts."

**By Pamela Mendels**

The words are made up, but what they describe is not: the tough test that would-be principals encounter when they apply for a job in Prince George's County, Md. A diverse school district hugging the eastern border of Washington, D.C., Prince George's County has introduced rigorous hiring methods and other practices to boost the quality of leadership in its 198 schools. In so doing, the district has also earned a spot among the pioneers in efforts nationally to ensure that public schools are led by the best principals possible.

"We think the most critical interaction in schools is between the teacher and the student, but second to that is leadership in the building," says Douglas Anthony, director of human capital management for the county, which, with 125,000 students, ranks among the 20 biggest school districts in the U.S. "Making sure we have great leadership in each building is of the utmost importance. That's why this work is so crucial."

Prince George's County is one of six school districts taking part in a six-year, $75 million initiative to establish strong principal "pipelines" — local systems ensuring that a large corps of school leaders is properly trained, hired, and developed on the job. The initiative was launched and financed by The Wallace Foundation, a philanthropy that, since 2000, has supported efforts nationwide to promote better school leadership. Selected from more than

90 school districts working on better leadership, Prince George's County and the other five grantee districts — Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C.; Denver, Colo.; Gwinnett County, Ga.; Hillsborough County, Fla., and New York City — were invited to take part in the initiative because they had particularly strong efforts under way. The Wallace funding is helping bolster their work. The districts will also be part of a major Wallace-funded independent evaluation to see whether pipelines make a difference in student achievement and how others can use the lessons from the districts' efforts.

The key idea behind the initiative is that obtaining effective principals requires four essential elements: principal standards, high-quality training, selective hiring, and a combination of solid on-the-job support and performance evaluation, especially for new hires. These may seem like common sense, but until recently, leadership was an afterthought for most districts and, as a consequence, important pipeline elements were either insufficient or missing altogether.

Now, several factors are changing the old scenario. One is government policy. Washington has begun recognizing the importance of school leadership through funding efforts, including Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants, and states have taken actions, including the adoption or adaptation of standards for principals developed by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (CCSSO, 2008). Another factor is research. Studies in recent years have confirmed that leadership ranks second only to teacher quality among school influences on student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 9). At the same time, in response to criticism that much of the university training and professional development principals receive is inadequate, researchers have determined what high-quality training, before and on the job, should look like (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007).

These factors combined have educators and policymakers looking intently at what they can do to promote school leadership. "Too often, we sit and wait for that 'superprincipal' to show up and lead a school," says John Youngquist, director of principal talent development in Denver and a former high school principal. "…With the level of leadership turnover our urban schools are experiencing, we need a strategy that is no longer based on hope, but on action."

The Wallace grantee districts are taking that action in varied efforts, but all share a conviction that the four pipeline parts need to fit together securely for the system to work. "Evaluation is important, but if you don't define leadership standards, how do you know what to assess?" asks Tricia McManus, director of leadership development with Hillsborough County Public Schools, which encompasses Tampa and is the nation's eighth-largest district. "... You can't have one component without the other."

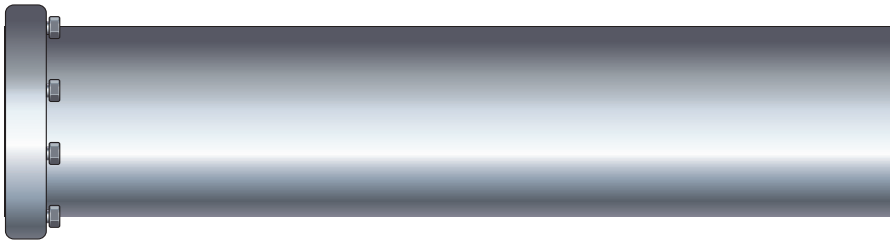
**PRINCIPAL STANDARDS: Districts create clear, rigorous job requirements detailing what principals and assistant principals must know and do.**

Standards for principals are the foundation on which everything else rests, says Youngquist in Denver. Ideally, standards reflect district needs and underpin what's taught to those enrolled in principal training programs, what's looked for in job candidates, what's built upon in professional development, and what's assessed in on-the-job performance evaluations. "The framework," says Youngquist, using the local term for Denver's set of standards, "provides a base upon which we will build priorities and monitor the effectiveness of the learning opportunities that we are providing over time."

New York City, the nation's largest school district with more than 1 million students, is among the Wallace-supported districts taking a close look at standards to see if they serve the rest of the pipeline well. Currently, the city's standards exist in a one-page school leadership competencies chart on the New York City Department of Education website. The document lists and defines core competencies of the principal in five areas, ranging from personal leadership to resources and operations, and then spells out what these competencies look like.

This year, the department is updating the standards to reflect the field's evolving understanding of what it means to be a good principal, says Anthony Conelli, deputy chief academic officer for the city's education department. Conelli cites one example: giving teachers and others an important role in leadership. The current standards make a glancing reference to this, saying that the effective principal "shares responsibilities appropriately." In recent years, reviews of New York City schools conducted by outside observers have found that leadership "distributed" in serious ways among the adults in a school build-

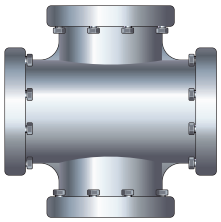


ing is a key aspect of school quality — and principals can ensure (or not) that it happens. That suggests that the standards may require a stronger statement about what some educators call "distributive leadership." "It's not simply saying, 'You're now in charge of the supply closet,' " Conelli notes. Rather, distributing leadership requires the principal to get staff involved in meaningful ways. The revised standards, he says, are likely to make the point.

**HIGH-QUALITY TRAINING: Preservice principal training programs — whether run by universities, nonprofits, or districts — recruit people who show the potential to become effective principals and give them high-quality training that responds to district needs.**

All the Wallace-supported districts have recognized the need to beef up training for aspiring principals. Perhaps the best-known effort among the six is the NYC Leadership Academy, a nine-year-old nonprofit that, through its training for New York City educators and work outside the city, has earned a national reputation for providing high-quality education and experiences to would-be principals. Early research suggests payoffs to the academy's work. One study found a steeper student improvement trajectory in English and math in New York City schools led by academy-trained principals than in similar schools led by other new principals (Corcoran, Schwartz, & Weinstein, 2009, 2011).



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New York isn't the only district that has made a serious commitment to improving preservice training. Hillsborough's work includes a program to train current principals and assistant principals to identify teachers with leadership potential, while Prince George's County's efforts include a pilot leadership program developed with the National Institute for School Leadership, a for-profit arm of the nonprofit National Center on Education and the Economy, a Washington, D.C.-based education policy and development group.

In the metro Atlanta area, the Gwinnett County district's Quality-Plus Leader Academy offers a range of leadership programs, including training for would-be principals and assistant principals. Aspiring principals take part in a yearlong program that includes nine hours of instruction per month, projects such as developing school improvement or staffing plans, and a 90-day residency in which program enrollees work with an exemplary principal. Moreover, Gwinnett, Georgia's largest school district, has recently begun working with two local universities to redesign their leadership programs to better meet district needs.

Similarly, Charlotte-Mecklenburg is branching out from a successful partnership it formed with nearby Winthrop University several years ago to develop a district-university principal training program with Queens University, a second area institution. One important lesson the district has learned along the way is that strong partnerships demand clearly understood roles and duties for each partner, according to Rashidah Morgan, director of leadership strategy for the district. "The challenge is the formalization of the partnership structure, sitting down with someone and saying, 'What do you expect of me?,' 'What do I expect of you?,' and 'How do we hold each other accountable?' " she says.

Denver, with 79,000 students, is the smallest of the Wallace grantee districts and has shown that such partnerships can take root. The 10-year-old Ritchie Program for School Leaders at the University of Denver is regarded as a model of district-university collaboration for school leadership training. It's also an exemplar of principal preparation programs, featuring rigorous selection of applicants, a curriculum focused on the principal's role in improving instruction, paid internships, and experienced university and district faculty members. The district, which is also home to a nonprofit that trains charter school leaders, is developing a yearlong residency program in which high-performing assistant principals will work under successful veteran principals to prepare for the top slot. "It's time that we gain advantage from the potential leaders among us by developing this talent and growing the principals we need for our schools that desperately need them," says Youngquist.

**SELECTIVE HIRING: Districts hire well-trained candidates with the right set of characteristics to be strong school leaders.**

For grantee districts, the effort to improve school leadership has brought a close examination of district hiring practices. Case in point: Prince George's County, where, until 2011, hiring "was not based on any objective criteria and certainly was not standards-based," according to Synthia Shilling, the district's chief human resources officer.

Today's three-stage hiring procedure scrutinizes candidates in ways designed to be objective enough to yield numerical scores for each job applicant. First, the candidates take the Gallup organization's 40-minute online PrincipalInsight assessment, a tool to predict a person's potential for success as a principal. The better-scoring candidates then move to the principal exercise described in part at the beginning of this article. In addition to producing the teacher memo, job seekers must write descriptions of how they would respond to five different problems, such as the pipes burst on the first day of school or a teacher falls short in a test-prep session. The job candidates who make the cut then face their third task: interviewing with three to four principal supervisors, who rate the candidates according to what they have heard.

In 2011, about 500 people got as far as the Gallup assessment. They were vying for one of only 28 principal slots open

that year. The top candidates were matched with schools based on detailed candidate specifications from school representatives. "It's all very defensible," Shilling says of the new hiring practices. "We can say to people, 'This is why you were selected; this is why you weren't.' We haven't had any grievances from the union."

The procedure has other benefits, too, including making district officials aware of shortcomings in its leadership pool. Last year, candidates as a whole were weak on data analysis, according to Shilling. The district now provides professional development on data to all assistant principals and aspiring principals. In addition, high-ranking performers who don't make the final cut receive training to burnish their skills.

A similar hiring overhaul in Charlotte-Mecklenburg has made an impression on the school representatives and zone superintendents who play a role in choosing the final candidate to fill principal slots there, says Morgan, the director of leadership strategy. "I recall the feedback from the zone superintendent was that the school selection committee was blown away by the quality of talent they saw," she says. "They felt like it was competitive talent, which is what you want."

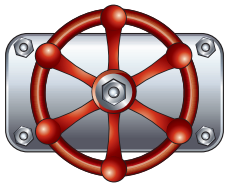
### ON-THE-JOB PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AND SUPPORT:

**Districts regularly assess the performance of newly hired principals and provide them with the professional development and mentoring they need to blossom and overcome weaknesses pinpointed in evaluations.**

Evaluation and support ideally go hand in hand: A novice leader's performance is assessed; he or she then receives the needed guidance to mature and overcome the weaknesses uncovered. Hillsborough has worked hard in recent years to make evaluations as meaningful as possible. Before the 2010-11 school year, principals were rated solely by their supervisors. Today, the supervisor's view is one of eight sources of information intended to paint a full portrait of a principal's performance. Schoolwide learning gains account for 40% of the picture; teacher ratings of the principal, 15% (as measured by VAL-ED, an assessment tool developed by researchers at Vanderbilt University with funding from The Wallace Foundation); school operations, 10%; four smaller factors (student attendance, student behavior, teacher retention, and principal evaluation of teachers), 20%; and the supervisor's rating (measured by VAL-ED), the remaining 15%. This year, a committee is working to refine the evaluation, using information gleaned from focus groups with principals. Matters under discussion include finding improved measures in teacher retention and teacher evaluation.

The big point, Hillsborough County's McManus says, is to make sure that the evaluation doesn't become an end in itself. "If it's done right, evaluation can provide information for what professional growth is needed," she says. "Based on the results of an evaluation, we can say a principal needs more training in distributive leadership or instructional leadership or how to use data." Hillsborough's new approach to evaluation comes at a time when the district has also introduced a new mentoring program for novice principals. A big topic among newcomers is time management, McManus says.

In 2006, Gwinnett County established a program that pairs retired principals with novices. Since then, the program has grown from three to 11 mentors, and today Gwinnett requires its new principals and assistant principals to take part in the program for at least two years. The novices, who meet one-on-one with their mentors and are required to have at least four hours of work with them monthly, also participate in group sessions that spotlight common stumbles noticed by mentors and program administrators over the years. One example is a widely held assumption that a school's climate can be changed by fiat from the new person at the top. "We needed to give them very practical guidance: 'This is how you go about changing climate. You have to get people on board; they have to have the opportunity for input,' " says Glenn Pethel, executive director of leadership development for Gwinnett schools.



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Making the right match between mentor and protege, based on factors including the demographics of the novice's school and the characteristics of its teachers, is one key to successful mentoring, according to Pethel and his colleague Linda Daniels, director of leadership development. Training for mentors in such things as the art of listening and questioning is crucial, in part so that mentors can avoid the common pitfall of being buddies to their protégées rather than coaches. "The novice leaders began to tell us anecdotally that these former principals are really, really helping us to better understand our new job responsibilities, not so much because they are telling us everything they know, but because they are causing us to think, reflect, and ask the right questions," Pethel says.

Pethel notes that mentoring is just one part of Gwinnett County's principal pipeline and that the other parts, too, need to be constructed and carefully fit together.

"Without alignment," he says, "components may be perceived as important but nothing more than isolated acts of improvement." He and his counterparts in the other pipeline districts are aware that none of this work is easy. Whether boosting mentoring or revamping standards, building a solid pipeline requires energy, money, and cooperation from many hands. But the districts doing the work are banking on a good return for their efforts. "The idea here is we want better-trained principals, and we're investing a tremendous amount of time and resources on them," says New York City's Conelli. "We want them to be successful on the job."

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Rebel with a cause

*Continued from p. 44*

work Whole-Faculty Study Groups (Murphy & Lick, 2005). Are there schools that started Whole-Faculty Study Groups that are no longer using the design? Yes, for two primary reasons: Leadership changed at the school or district level, and productive group work is hard work. Measuring impact on students means record keeping; looking at student work means looking at teacher work. Without support for principals and problem-specific support for study groups, disillusionment is likely. In such situations, it is too hard to continue. For any form of learning community in schools, strategies for supporting, monitoring, and assessing the impact on students must be clear before beginning. Based on available resources, learning systems are not hard to design. However, such systems are very difficult to maintain without visible support from district and school leaders.

In 2005, I put my luggage in storage and became an observer. I see the term "professional learning community" in every professional publication I receive. Catalogs and advertisements are full of references. Today, believing in the merits of learning communities is like believing in the American way. If asked, any principal is likely to say, "Yes, of course, we have communities of learners in our school." Pressed for more descriptive information, we would hear responses that reflect a range in likelihood that students are going to benefit from what the teachers are doing.

What will be the next revolution in our profession? Will it be Learning Forward's standards? Will it be a new plan by the federal government to "save education"? Who will be the rebels — will it be teachers tired of wasting time and energy in unproductive professional learning communities? Let's hope whatever it is and whoever are the initiators, our country's children will be the benefactors.


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